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Event, Weak Pedagogy, and Shattered Love in John Williams' *Stoner*

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Abstract

What do we mean when we talk about events? Can we even (really) say we know what an 'event' is? To begin thinking about teaching in terms of the event is to begin thinking about all of those things that happen in our classrooms that we don't and can't control. Thinking the event means thinking about the unthinkable, the unforeseeable and ultimately the unknowable. It is about letting go of a concept – almost impossible to relinquish – that teaching and learning are transparent entities: understandable, limitable, predictable, something we can and do *know* about. Thinking about the event is thinking about what actually *happens*, not what we think should or ought to happen in our classrooms.

Contributor Note

Éamonn Dunne is a research scholar at the School of Education, Trinity College Dublin. He is currently living and teaching in Bangkok, Thailand, and working on a book on events of unlearning and the philosophy of weak pedagogy. He is the author of *J. Hillis Miller and the Possibilities of Reading: Literature after Deconstruction* (Continuum, 2010), *Reading Theory Now* (Bloomsbury, 2013) and, with Aidan Seery, *The Pedagogics of Unlearning* (Punctum, 2016). Research interests include philosophies of the event, radical pedagogies, and literature and trauma.

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'I don't know', *je ne sais pas*, signals a situation. In what I have elsewhere called its *restance*, remittance, the poem always speaks beyond knowledge, *au-delà du savoir*. It writes, and what it writes is, first of all, this very fact, that it is addressed and destined beyond knowledge.

– Jacques Derrida

Penguin Books have recently been releasing a beautiful little series of pocket books designed to get you thinking as you make your commute to and from work. These little portable distractions appear in an elegant series called *Philosophy in Transit*. They are bite-size, commuter-friendly books written in an accessible and easy style by top contemporary philosophers. Slavoj Žižek's contribution is entitled *Event* and meanders through that theme in a delightful manner in a series of six short chapters referred to as 'stops'. As expected Žižek is witty and surprising along the way, combining incisive political critique with sparkling philosophical aphorisms, pop-cultural icons, sporting heroes and a thrilling smatter of lurid quips and quirky anecdotes. Effectively, what you get in *Event* is an introduction to what Žižek calls the 'conundrum of definition' and the 'illimitable risk' of event by way of Buddha, Hegel, film noir, bucketloads of excrement, Kierkegaard, Freud, Brittany Spears' vagina, and of course the compulsory Lacanian forays into the imaginary, the symbolic and the real.

The blurb on the back, however, is what interest me here and I will use this to open up a conversation about event as a quasi-concept in philosophy (by way of Jack Caputo) and literature (by way of John Williams' stunning novel *Stoner*). I'm calling this a 'quasi-concept' (or 'non-concept') in order to immediately draw attention, not only to the difficulty of its

definition, which is unquestionably mired in mist and fog, but also to the possibility that we might actually be wrong about it from the very beginning; and that might be really, honestly, all we can say about it. Whatever it is we may think we know about this topic becomes questionable from the moment we investigate it. If there is one thing the philosophers have taught us about this topic it is that with this we are all borne back ceaselessly into a past that offers us little respite, little sanctuary, and little real understanding. The more we beat against it, the more it pushes us back. A little bit like St. Augustine's take on the problem of time, we all seem to know exactly what an event is until someone asks us to explain it. Then we get stuck. The blurb on *Event* reads as follows: What is really happening when something happens?

In the second in a new series of accessible, commute-length books of original thought, Slavoj Žižek, one of the world's greatest living philosophers, *examines the new and highly-contested concept of event*.

If you think about this for a moment, there are at least two things wrong with this statement. The first is that the concept of event is not new; in fact it is anything but new. In recent philosophy alone its insistence is keenly felt in the likes of Alain Badiou, Maurice Blanchot, Michel Foucault, Giles Deleuze, Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Luc Nancy, Henri Maldiney, Claude Romano, and Jacques Derrida to speak only of a few key figures. Before those key figures one would have to include Nietzsche (especially his *fröhliche Wissenschaft* and *Zarathustra*), Heidegger (on *Ereignis* for instance), Kierkegaard (on irony), Augustine, Aristotle, Plato, Heraclitus and

so on and so forth. So the concept of event is not new. Not by a long shot.

The second problem with the blurb is, as I've intimated, that *the event is not a concept*. Events, in fact, worry conception. Events do not settle into ideas about events; they actually alert us to our inability to settle into ideas about events, to rest or keep stationary the consciousness of things, to conceive the self-same, the thing-in-itself (*das Ding an sich*). Events cannot be bracketed in the *Epoché* of phenomenological reduction or siphoned off into a corner of consciousness. Žižek's way of putting this problem in his little book is by way of one of Maurice Blanchot's self-interviews:

Question: 'Will you admit this fact, that we are at a turning point?'

Answer: 'If it's a fact it's not a turning point'. (Žižek 2014)

Meaning that a turning point (an event) changes the very parameters around which we measure facts. The event, in fact, changes the entire field in which facts appear and disappear. It's really this latter point that concerns me in my own thinking of the event and specifically in my own teaching where the thinking of the event is pervasive, invasive – and I mean 'invasive' in its etymological sense as a troubling factor, an attack or invasion of the senses, giving rise to what Deborah Britzman would call 'difficult knowledge'.

Given the entire history of thinking in this area I can only limit myself here to what Jack Caputo has been saying about the event and argue why I think this is quintessential for a productive rethinking of present circumstances in pedagogical theory and practice, especially since current neoliberal agendas have given rise to an unprecedented managerialism

in the guise of benchmarking, research frameworks, hyperstructuring and targeted outcomes within our schools and universities. What concerns me now is how Caputo has been speaking of the event as a peculiar pedagogical predicament. So my leading question is why is the event consistently a pedagogical dilemma? Why does Caputo keep coming back to teaching? God teaching St. Paul (by pushing him off his horse), Jesus teaching his disciples, Derrida teaching Caputo, Caputo teaching his own classes. Why always, always already, does Caputo infer that the question of the event, precisely *what happens*, and we remember Derrida says 'Deconstruction is what happens' (*C'est qui arrive*) – which is the event: deconstruction is an event, a gesture towards the im-possible – why always does it come back, detour after detour, counterpath after counterpath, to the question of what happens when we teach or think about teaching? In a *roundabout* way, that's my question. Why is thinking the event thinking teaching?

Since I teach literature most of the time and think through literature, through stories, poems and plays, my hypothesis is that the best way to see how events take place (replace or displace) us in teaching and reading is through narrative examples. If you really think about what happens in a classroom when you teach literature it's never really about learning outcomes, trajectories, subject planning, goals or objectives or, however ludicrously, even understanding or knowledge. This is why Aristotle's *phronesis*, for instance, is so important. To presume to know what your students are getting out of the promissory note of education can be murderous, Avital Ronell avers (Ronell 2004: 63). This despite the ubiquitous neo-liberalist logic of late capitalism: that students are

consumers and teachers are producers. This logic, perniciously claiming the working lives of teachers in second and third level institutions around the world, is what Gert Biesta, in a nod to Jacques Rancière, calls the 'learnification' of education (Biesta 2012: 35-49).

If you really think about it, just for a moment, an *Augenblick*, and before it's gone again, what becomes important in literature classes is *not* knowing the learning outcome, *not* knowing where you're headed, *not* knowing why or how what you're reading or teaching is important. Not knowing the importance, in point of fact, is what's important – the inutility of it all, the in-essential, the *destinerrance* of it all. If we knew where reading and teaching a specific text would lead us then it wouldn't be worth the trek. In Benjamin's surprising formulation: '*Methode ist Umweg*', a digression, a wandering, *Holzwege*.

As my example of why this is always the case, I'll take John William's astonishing novel *Stoner*, which *The Sunday Times* enticingly describes as 'The greatest novel you've never read'. I'll argue that *Stoner* is a brilliant exemplification of how teaching as event might be imagined (im-possibly) in fictional discourse and that that novel is a literary dramatisation of the arguments Caputo and contemporary philosophy on the event have passionately, knowingly or unknowingly envisioned. So let's start with Caputo.

Here's Caputo's understanding of the event – in five easy pieces:

1. 'An event is not precisely what happens, which is what the word suggests in English, but something going on in what happens... it is not something present, but something

seeking to make itself felt in what is present'.

2. 'Accordingly, I would distinguish between a *name* and the event that is astir or that transpires in a name. The name is a kind of provisional formulation of an event, a relatively stable if evolving structure, while the event is ever restless'.

3. 'An event is not a thing but something astir in a thing'.

4. 'Words and things are deconstructible, but events, if there are any such things, are not deconstructible'.

5. 'In terms of temporality, events, never being present, solicit us from afar, draw us on, draw us out into the future, calling us hither. Events are provocations and promises, and they have the structure of what Derrida calls the unforeseeable 'to come' (*à venir*)'. (Caputo 2007: 47-48)

In more recent books like *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, *The Weakness of God* and *The Insistence of God* Caputo continually refines his position on the event. But more often than not what gives itself over in his repetitions is a resonance of the miracle of iterability – the other in (insisting in) the repetition of the same.

'Education', says Caputo, 'is an event'. If you are to take him at his word then this name harbours something within it, a desire for some other, for some-thing otherwise than being and beyond essence. Education, like love, the gift, justice, responsibility, is a quasi-transcendental in the Caputo universe,

a provocation to thinking, even an incitement to riot. What often gets lost in this word, as what often gets lost in the God of onto-theology, is Augustine's question: '*Quid ergo amo, cum deum meum amo?*' [What do I love when I love my God?]. How easy to transfer this over to the most pertinent question for us today? 'What do I love when I love education'?

For Caputo, the answer to that question is that we are in love with the weak force of a promise. The promise 'to come', that something might come, something that we can't foresee. It is what is *going on in* the classroom, not what we think *ought* to be happening or even what we think *is* happening that's important. Education is therefore like 'a desire beyond desire', a desire that we don't fully understand, nor should we even. Education is haunted by the promise not of the 'future-present' but of an 'absolute future', the future that we cannot plan (Caputo 2012: 23-34). That's what scares most of us, and it should, Caputo claims, because if you don't know what's coming around the corner then you can't protect yourself against it. This is precisely where hospitality comes into the equation and democracy. For both Derrida and Caputo the promise of democracy is 'a weak imperative', a work in progress, a desire within a desire, something we just can't know and it's this nonknowledge that scares educators the most. But, of course, you just can't say this to educators without risking something – like your job, your credibility, your career! Says Caputo in the opening interview of this issue:

But, the truth is that we serve the event, are in bonds to the event, and we are not a 'master', just as we are not a 'doctor' of the event but a patient. But confessing such non-agency, receptivity

and non-knowing is not a recommended course at a job interview or a conference presentation and it is not a path to tenure. At such times we are expected to be upright bodies not beings of flesh. The best advice I can give you on this point is this. For a long time, at least, this confession may be permitted only as an aside (an apostrophe) when for a moment, an *Augenblick*, in the midst of a lecture or a dialogue one notes, by the way, just in passing, as if this were not a serious point, almost as if we were joking (the comic as the incognito of the religious), that none of us know who we are. Then we get back to 'business'. (See page 15, this issue)

Caputo's claim is not that educators ought to acknowledge the limitations of what they can and cannot do, but that they actually need to become aware that what they do is unthinkable, even impossible, as Freud suggested before him (Britzman 2010). Perhaps, and it is always a question of perhaps for Caputo – his clever pun, as we've seen, is *Peut-être* against *l'être* (being against 'may-being') – there can be a new metapedagogics of failure and non-knowing to springboard effective, alternative, radically underexplored kinds of learning: 'The teacher must figure out how to be a weak force, how the middle voice works, how to be an agent without agency, a provocateur who is not an agent, how to engage the spooky dynamics of a haunting spirit' (Caputo 2012: 27).

If the teacher is not a master then what is she? To summarize a little then, Caputo's argument is that good teachers are conjurers, magicians, and people with the uncanny ability to let thinking happen, to let events take place. They are people who welcome the event by saying come, *veni foras*, or *oui oui*. 'To

learn', says Caputo, 'is to unlearn what we think we know and expose ourselves to the unknowable. Teaching and learning alike are a matter of allowing ourselves to be spooked' (2012: 34).

The art of good teaching is not about becoming a master but much more radically about unbecoming one, unbecoming one-self, becoming ignorant, unlearning. You have to give yourself over to the possibility, as impossible as it may sound, to being spooked into an educational experience, to being haunted by the ghost of a chance of getting it right, to seeing it right even, perhaps especially, if that seeing it right means getting it wrong. We educators must learn to say 'stay, speak, I charge thee' to the spirit of education, the spirit that comes unannounced and seeks an impossible hospitality.

Stoner's Love

I'll return to questions of unlearning and weakness in due course, but I turn first to a single moment in John Williams' 1965 novel *Stoner* under the auspices of this leading idea. The novel is experiencing something of a rebirth at the moment and has very recently found a considerable readership, becoming a bestseller across Europe fifty years after its initial publication.

First published in England in 1972, the novel quickly went out of print after a poor run; and this despite C. P. Snow's glowing review and repeated refrain in *The Financial Times*, 'Why isn't this novel a classic?' The novel was simply forgotten for over thirty years. It wasn't until 2003 that it reappeared as a Vintage Classic in England with a fine introduction by John McGahern and became a New York Review of Books Classic in 2006. The

novel begins with the wonderfully pointed and concise rendition of a life lived in an academic world that really neither cared for nor wanted the eponymous William Stoner. In just over one paragraph on the opening page the entire story is really summed up:

William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of eighteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same university, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. The manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: 'Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues'.

An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual question. (Williams 2012: 3)

In superb limpid prose Williams chronicles the life of William Stoner from humble beginnings on a farmland in the remote Missouri, through his undergraduate, graduate and teaching career, through an unhappy marriage, his

failure as a father, a brief love affair and finally a muted death.

Later when Stoner first arrives at the university he begins a course of study in the School of Agriculture but must also take a survey course in English literature. Difficulties immediately arise for the young student as he finds this course remarkably different from his other studies. He describes these as disturbing and disquieting in an inexpressible way. There follows one of two astonishing moments in the novel where the subjects of teaching and learning are handled with remarkable sensitivity and depth.

Here's what we know of Stoner's touching moment: Stoner sits and listens to his professor as he recites Shakespeare's sonnet 73: 'that time of year thou mayest in me behold' and is awe-struck. He listens and watches his professor read it from his textbook. Then his teacher drops the book and recites from memory:

In me thou see'st the glowing of
such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth
doth lie,
As the death-bed whereon it must
expire,
Consumed with that which it was
nourished by.
This thou perceivest, which makes
thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must
leave ere long

The professor directs a question directly at Stoner: 'what does this sonnet mean?' Stoner draws a blank. 'Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr Stoner; Do you hear him?' Unable to speak, Stoner mutters: 'It means'. He then repeats this: 'It means'.

The moment is simultaneously traumatic and exquisite.

Stoner's response is obviously a failure. But it seems the most honest. His failure, ignorance, and the traumatic moment of his unknowing, of his forgetting, conclude in an awareness that he cannot even express to himself or to us. It's that moment that is most life-changing for Stoner and, by extension, the close reader of this novel.

Un-learning

If, as McGahern argued, this novel is a novel about love, then it is a novel about the love of unlearning, of touching a void or vacuum where meaning is hollowed out and where the yearning for meaning meets the love of learning, where another kind of learning is espoused, the kind of learning that encounters in the alterity of meaning the announcement of another learning, a learning without learning, a prosthesis of knowing.

In reading literature up to this point Stoner has been struck by the absolute inutility of it all: 'He read and reread his literature assignments so frequently that his work in other courses began to suffer; and still the words he read were words on pages, and he could not see the use of what he did' (9). Behind 'their flat, dry meaning', Stoner hopes to find a 'clue' to allow him to unravel the mystery of meaning, to unlock the hermeneutic ideal, the one Truth. He longs for the moment of epiphany when he can find the use for what he is doing, when he can effectively look behind the words and discover some transcendental signified, some ur-referent about which his learning is directed. Stoner's belief is that this can in some way be taught. That he is missing, in his lectures, up to this

point an instruction. He is searching for a reassurance that there is some underlying rationale to be found beneath the veil.

It's an effect of language, says Foucault echoing Nietzsche, that it gives rise to a dual suspicion. On the one hand we are suspicious that there is an underlying truth behind appearances, that we merely lack the interpretive apparatus to see it. 'Language doesn't say exactly what it says [*le langage ne dit pas exactement ce qu'il dit*], so we are often wary that we are missing some underlying sense'. This is not a new insight, the Greeks referred to this dyad as *allegoria* and *hyponoia*. The title of Paul de Man's great work on close reading, for example, *Allegories of Reading*, is an exemplary extended meditation on this point and what he calls language's 'aberrancy'. On the other hand, there is the effect of language that overflows itself; the contention that language is more than simply verbal expression and that it hyperbolically exists in non-linguistic forms: it might be that nature, the sea, rustling trees, animals, faces, masks, crossed swords all speak' (Foucault 1989: 59).

Indeed, but why should we stop there? The list of course is interminable, for the question of reading, like language, can't be closed off all that simply. Interpreting two magpies as good luck may be a superstition that is easily identifiable as such, but acknowledging that we are inevitably prey to imposing on the faces of those we meet in public the private narratives of our own suspicions is more difficult to inculcate. Or, for present purposes, that it is impossible for us not to read into the descriptions of Williams' characters (despite the 'Plain Style') their unrepresented, unrepresentable, deeper psychological sentiments, intuitions and motivations. Seeing this, as we may

occasionally do, enables a reading that is more attuned to the dangers implied by Foucault's speculation than mere acceptance. That is, it's all too easy to accept the difference and forget about it, but it is a central question that *Stoner* throws into the light of day both stylistically and thematically.

Such is the case with Stoner's splendid misreading of Edith, whose initial personal disclosure (her 'plea for help') of her stilted formal education, unloving parents and sterile adolescence, strangely preempts his love for her. Novels invariably represent scenes of falling in love hyperbolically. It's a trait we are used to, but one that keeps readers alive, delighted and enthralled nonetheless. Though we read Lawrence's extensive sentimentalizing and are aware of its mawkishness we are still drawn in by what F. R. Leavis was wont to call its 'vitality'.

It is the power of love to bring us deeper into the richness of a narrative, even if that richness is poorly constructed or overwritten. In the case of *Stoner*, however, that moment is bizarrely rendered, almost reversed, to the point that the reader is left wondering how and why that love has come about at all. Edith's personal disclosure is mechanical and functional. We are told that Stoner's awkward attempts to engage her in phatic conversation have failed and that he is getting up to leave, whereupon Edith delivers the story of her life in sentences that run on interminably 'without inflection'. Stoner's recollection is that during the hour and a half they spend together that December night Edith tells him more about herself than she ever will again. 'And when it was over, he felt that they were strangers in a way that he had not thought they would be, and he knew that he was in love' (53).

It is precisely because Stoner does not understand that he falls in love with Edith. This is a salutary moment for teachers who view love as their calling, for Stoner's love is not returned. Though they marry, his misreading of Edith's plea is wildly mistaken. Ironically, he falls in love with a stranger who will remain a stranger. The hospitality he shows to his beloved in falling in love transforms him into a host for a parasite. He falls into the unknown and is captured by it, enraptured and ensnared. In a way his blindness, his failure to understand that not understanding is not always a benign occurrence, unlike his failure to understand literature (which becomes his *love* for literature), results in his catastrophic marriage.

Weak Teaching

What do we learn about teaching from reading *Stoner*? Williams spoke about the novel as an exercise in trying to come to terms with teaching, of figuring out how to do it effectively (Woolley 1986). In the novel's purview teaching is a queer thing, in the sense that it has to do with something beyond knowing what one is doing. There is a sense of the job of teaching, which is the sense Stoner has, of the 'tradition', but there is also the love of the thing: 'It all grows out of the love of the thing. The lack of love defines a bad teacher' (Woolley 1986). Saying that effective teaching is love is a little like Caputo's little apostrophe: you don't say that in a job interview! 'Why do you want to teach'? Should not be followed with the answer 'I'm in love'. You should just get down to 'business'. You should know the programme, the task at hand, the learning outcomes, the key objectives, the instrumentalist jargon. Just teach the curriculum! And yet, as Nancy puts it in his most eloquent

discourse on the subject, 'Philosophy never arrives at this thinking – that "thinking is love", even though it is inscribed at the head of its program, or as the general epigraph to all its treatises' (Nancy 1991: 86). If we accept this treatise, then we must reconsider that the task inscribed in the philosophy of teaching is the thinking of love, of what it is to love one's task. At the heart of teaching is weak thinking, a subjunctive mood: what do I love when I love my teaching? What do I love when I love learning? What is my pact with the impossible? Would it be possible to even think love as a response to this predicament of understanding? It is weak because it cannot answer these questions.

To this failure I add the love of unlearning as a peripheral, perverse aspect of all pertinent acknowledgement, a quasi-spectral hermeneutics, a hermeneutics of the *a-venir*, of the coming future possibilities of teaching and learning that cannot be adequately envisioned by arming-up with curricula, with professional competencies, with learning outcomes, with projections and the disingenuous market jargon of instrumentalism and agenda. 'Learning starts with unlearning [*Entlernen*]', as Werner Hamacher points out. 'We gather "around" the suspension of all knowledge, ability and action. It is only this "suspension" which is between us, and *out of* which we become we' (Hamacher 2004: 171). Perhaps, and it is always a question of perhaps when it comes to weak teaching, weak thinking, weak reading, there is a realm of non-knowledge from which the logician is banished. Perhaps, this dangerous perhaps, can lead us beyond thinking like a pedant and proclaiming the Enlightenment again and again without asking why. Perhaps it can teach us that

thinking is love, that being suspended by or in the event of learning is what really matters. What really matters is astir in the event. Learning, we could say, 'belongs to the sphere of invitation, of invocation, to the poetics of

proclamation, of *kerygma*' (Caputo 2006: 16). It belongs without belonging to the event of unlearning, which is miraculous. Teaching, like reading, is always a profession of faith. It is impossible. It's a vocation for lovers of the impossible.

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